

THE LUBOVITCHER MOVEMENT: II

"The Root and the Branches"

HERBERT WEINER

IT WAS after midnight when a young student ran into the outer office of the Lubovitcher Hasidic movement at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn to announce that the "case" from California, a man who had flown in to consult with the Lubovitcher Rebbe about a business problem, had just left. That meant it was my turn to see the Rebbe and, clutching my notebook, I hurried past several people waiting in the hallway whose appointments with the Rebbe came after mine. Remembering that there are thousands who depend on the Rebbe for every major and most minor decisions in their lives, and that the world-wide spiritual network known as the Lubovitcher movement, its schools and charities and publications, all wait on the personal attention of this one man, I felt a bit guilty at taking up his time for the sake of an article in a magazine. I resolved not to stay long as I knocked at the door of his private office and entered.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson,* the seventh Lubovitcher Rebbe, the son-in-law of the sixth Rebbe, and a direct descendant (on his father's side) of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Ladi, the founder of the Lubovitcher dynasty, was folding some papers at a desk in the far corner of a large, rather bare room. His fedora hat, neatly tailored frock coat, and carefully arranged

tie, all black, set off the pallor of his face. The brim of his hat was bent, casting a shadow over his deep blue eyes, which looked up with a direct but good-humored expression. I extended my hand, forgetting for the moment that Hasidim do not offer their hands to the Rebbe, who is to them a "holy vessel" and not to be touched casually. But Rabbi Menachem Mendel didn't seem to mind the impropriety; he shook my hand and motioned gently toward the chair by his desk, suggesting in a soft voice that I address him in English, although he would reply in Yiddish.

Before I could begin my questions, he asked me what kind of work I was engaged in and what I had studied. My notebook with its proposed questions remained closed and I found myself chatting freely about matters I had not expected to discuss. The Rebbe listened, nodding his head from time to time to indicate understanding, and gradually the sense of urgent haste I had felt in the hallway began to ebb away. We spoke about religious leaders in Israel, particularly the former Chief Rabbi, Abraham Isaac Kuk, at the mention of whose name the Rebbe nodded slightly without saying a word. I sensed that his silence was a way of expressing disapproval without transgressing the commandment "Thou shalt not speak evil," and asked if he did not share my admiration for Rabbi Kuk.

The Rebbe shook his head gently. "He

LAST month, in the first half of his two-part article, HERBERT WEINER described the headquarters in Brooklyn of the Lubovitcher Hasidic movement, reporting on his conversations with several prominent members of the sect and describing an all-night festive gathering of the Hasidim at which the Rebbe "gave Torah." Here Rabbi Weiner pursues rather more intensively his investigation of the movement's "inner mystic meaning." Rabbi Weiner is himself leader of the Reform congregation of Temple Israel in South Orange, New Jersey. He was educated at the University of Massachusetts, the Jewish Institute of Religion, and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

*My attention has been called to errors in the spelling of some proper names in the first part of the article. Names deriving from the name *Shneur* in Hebrew assume variant forms in English transliteration, as Schneersohn, or Schneerson—the latter spelling is preferred by the present Rebbe. Lubovitch is frequently spelled Lubawitz, or Lubavitch—I have used the spelling which I believe comes closest to the actual pronunciation. But no such excuse can be offered for my having referred to Rabbi J. Weinberg, my "globe-trotter" friend, as Weingarten.

tried to mix too much together. Philosophy, law, mysticism—there were too many paradoxes in his teachings. A leader should not confuse the mind too much.”

The Rebbe's quiet definition of the functions of a leader reminded me of how disappointed I had been some weeks before at the *farbrengung*—that all-night gathering of the Lubovitcher Hasidim to celebrate the anniversary of the previous Rebbe's release from a Soviet prison—when I listened to his various discourses. His “Torah” had indeed not confused the mind—it had seemed, if anything, too simple.

SUDDENLY a buzzer sounded, a signal from Rabbi Hodakov, the Rebbe's secretary, that almost a full hour had passed since my interview began. Hastily I turned to my prepared questions and asked how Lubovitcher Hasidism, a mystical movement, had become so skillful in worldly matters like public relations and methods of business efficiency. The Rebbe folded his hands on his desk and in a measured voice outlined his answer, which was punctuated by an occasional mild cough.

Lubovitch's interest in public relations was simply a practical extension of its special interpretation of the oneness of God. God was in everything, and therefore evil had no real existence. But it must *appear* to have real existence, so that man might have freedom of choice. It might seem to us an evil thing for one man to cut another with a knife, yet there were occasions, as for example a medical operation, when a good and not an evil purpose was served by the cutting of a man. So also, what appeared evil in *our* sight was, in the light of a higher wisdom, really good. To believe otherwise, to believe that evil has a positive existence, was to be driven in the end to the conviction that there are two divine powers rather than one. The oneness of God implied that everything was ultimately justified; in this way, the Rebbe concluded, “We try to understand Hitler and similar matters.”

From Hitler and similar matters the Rebbe returned to the original point about the Lubovitcher talent for public relations. His father-in-law and predecessor, Rabbi Joseph Isaac (the first Lubovitcher Rebbe to settle in America), seeing how effective public relations could be in this country, had de-

cided that since nothing was inherently evil, there was no reason why he should not use this tool for good purposes. “To divide things into separate compartments and sections and to say that this belongs to God, and this doesn't, is the worst idolatry,” Rabbi Menachem Mendel declared.

Again the buzzer sounded, but the Rebbe indicated that I needn't hurry. I turned to my central question: how could the Rebbe assume responsibility for giving advice to his Hasidim not only on religious matters, but on medical problems or business affairs, especially when he knew that his advice was binding.

Menachem Mendel did not seem offended by what I had feared would be an indiscreet question. “To begin with, it is always pleasant to run away from responsibility. But what if one's running might destroy the congregation, and suppose”—the good-humored smile in the Rebbe's eyes grew stronger—“they put the key into your pocket and walk away? What can you do then—permit the books to be stolen?”

I was surprised to hear him hint at the well-known fact that it had taken the Hasidim more than a year to persuade Rabbi Menachem Mendel—who had studied science at the Sorbonne—to become the seventh Rebbe of the Lubovitcher movement. But this wasn't the answer to my question, which I tried to press by leafing through a copy of the *Tanya* (a collection of the writings of the first Lubovitcher Rebbe, Shneur Zalman) to find a letter in which the “old Rebbe,” as Shneur Zalman is called, tells his Hasidim that they must not ask him for help in non-spiritual matters. The Rebbe interrupted my search to say that I was probably looking for letter 22. “That letter,” he pointed out quietly, “was printed after Shneur Zalman's death, and besides,” he smiled, “despite the letter, he did give advice in material matters.”

Sensing after a moment that his explanation did not satisfy me, the Rebbe cleared his throat and continued. “When a man comes with a problem, there are only two alternatives—either send him away, or try to help him. A man knows his own problem best, so one must try to unite oneself with him and become *‘batel’*—as dissociated as possible from one's own ego. Then, in concert with the other person, one tries to un-

derstand the rule of Divine Providence in this particular case. And, of course, if the man who comes to you shares your ideas and faith, there is immediate empathy" (he used the English word).

But didn't the power of the Lubovitcher movement stem directly from this faith of the Hasid in his Rebbe? Rabbi Menachem Mendel demurred gently, "I'm not so sure."

The buzzer rang again, and I looked at the Rebbe to see if my interview was over. Instead of sending me away, however, he began talking about Conservative and Reform Judaism. His voice remained soft, but the opinions were firm. "The great fault of Conservative and Reform Judaism is not that they compromise, but that they sanctify the compromise, still the conscience, and leave no possibility for return." The Rebbe went on to explain that though the Lubovitcher movement encouraged every Jew to observe as many of the commandments as he could, even if only a few, it insisted that the Jewish religion as such should be identified exclusively with the Orthodox tradition; otherwise, a repentant Jew who wanted to "return" would not know what there was to return to.

When the buzzer rang once again, I rose to leave, but Rabbi Menachem Mendel stopped me: "Wait—now I would like to ask you a question," he said, and I sat down again. "How is it that you are not Orthodox?" Surprised, I offered something about not being able to believe that the whole of the Torah was given by God.

"Yet you believe in the oneness of God," the Rebbe pressed. "And if you follow out the implication of that belief logically, then you must come to the *mitzvot*, the commandments, as surely as theorems follow from axioms." Again the Rebbe used English words. I remained silent, and after a moment he leaned back in his chair and spoke as if answering himself, "But I guess in America people don't feel the need for a full logical *shitah*—system of belief—as they do in Europe."

For the fifth time the buzzer rang and, disturbed at the thought of all those people waiting outside, I made a determined effort to leave. But as I stood up the Rebbe stopped me again. "You haven't asked, but probably you'd like to know, what Hasidim think about miracles?" I remained standing

while Rabbi Menachem Mendel asserted that even science recognized all "laws" as mere probabilities, and that there was no way to foretell every event in nature with certainty. He cited the throwing of dice as an example—a strange *mashal* (illustration) I thought to myself, for a Hasid to use.

After he had finished expounding the Hasidic view of miracles, I asked him if it would be possible to see him again when I had become more familiar with the Lubovitcher movement. "Gladly," he smiled, "but not until after the High Holy Days." The High Holy Days were only a month away.

I walked toward the door, trying, in accordance with good Hasidic procedure, not to turn my back too obviously on the Rebbe. Outside I passed a bearded young Hasid who had been waiting for more than two hours and seemed irritated. I apologized for having stayed so long, adding that the Rebbe had struck me as a wonderful man, and the young Hasid's face immediately softened. As I was leaving the building, another young man, who had given me a photograph of the Rebbe when I came in, approached. "Nu, a gut vort?—A good word?" he asked. Hasidim believe that a bit of the Rebbe's aura may cling to a person who has just left his presence. I tried to oblige by commenting on how remarkable was the Rebbe's ability to concentrate so fully on each of the many people who came to see him. "He will make a Hasid out of you yet," the young man said with a proud grin, shaking my hand.

PERHAPS, I thought to myself, but actually my first meeting with the Rebbe had brought me no closer to understanding what it was that made a Lubovitcher Hasid. I knew now that Rabbi Menachem Mendel was a warm and sincere leader—a man who, though in absolute control of a large and influential organization, lived modestly with his wife in a \$75-a-month apartment, and devoted every minute of his waking hours to the advancement of Torah and the needs of other human beings. That such a man could arouse love and admiration in his followers was not at all surprising. But this alone could not be the explanation of the amazing vitality of the movement.

I knew that I had not yet begun to understand the inner dynamic of Lubovitch, and the next day I asked Rabbi Hodakov for

permission to spend some time at the Yeshiva speaking and even studying a bit with the "boys." To my surprise he hesitated. "You know," he said, with a rather bashful smile, "even in medicine everything depends on the quantity—a little may do good, and a lot, harm. . . ."

However he finally agreed to my request, and the following morning I spoke to Rabbi Mentlik, who supervises, under the guidance of the Rebbe, the High Yeshiva at 770 Eastern Parkway. I recognized him by his red beard and silver-rimmed spectacles as the "cup-bearer" who had stood all night by the Rebbe's side during the *farbrengung* without participating in the singing and without even so much as moving—he had achieved utter *hitbatlut*, self-extinction—in the Rebbe's presence. When I informed him that Rabbi Hodakov had given me permission to study, he spoke to a few boys who, in singsong voice, were discussing a passage in the Talmud, and they made room for me on the bench.

I found myself sitting next to an eighteen-year-old lad with long fuzzy earlocks. He mentioned to me that he was born in Russia and raised there in the educational "underground" once maintained by the Lubovitcher movement under the Soviet regime. Though we began studying a problem in Talmud together, it was soon clear that our minds were elsewhere. I was interested in asking him about his experiences in Russia, and his curiosity was aroused by the phenomenon of a Reform Jew wandering about the halls of Lubovitch. Whenever we came to a break in the Talmudic discussion, we would immediately exchange questions. He told me how his father had been sent to Siberia after being denounced to the secret police for his religious activities, and how the rest of the family had finally escaped to Southern Russia. Then he wanted to know how a rabbi could accept one part of the Bible as holy but reject the commandments ordained in some other section; did not the Bible declare itself to be entirely inspired? He could understand, he admitted earnestly, that a rabbi might want to hold a pulpit in a Reform synagogue—to make a better living or for social convenience—but the logic of the Reform position was beyond him.

I had resolved not to enter into any religious disputations at the Yeshiva, but it

was hard to put the young Hasid off. The next night he brought up the subject again. When he saw that I was determined not to enter into a serious discussion, he sighed, lifting up his hands in a weary gesture of resignation, "What can be the *tachlis*, after all—the purpose of anything—if not to fulfill the word of God? In forty or sixty years, everything passes away. What meaning can it all have if not to obey God's commandments?" I was struck by this youngster's easy dismissal of forty or sixty years of life. A few days later he caught me in the hallway and again questioned the logic of the liberal religious position. A bit irritated, I asked if the fact that so many intelligent people were unable to see the logic of Orthodoxy did not make him wonder about the absolute certainty of his own convictions. My young friend was delighted that I had risen to the debate and his reply came swiftly. "Ah-hah—but Abraham too was alone—yet he had the truth. And we know now from the atom bomb how much power there is in the 'little.'"

DURING the following weeks at the Yeshiva, I met several other young men born under the Communist regime in Russia. One of them, a good-looking, black-bearded fellow in his late twenties, had been in this country only a few years, but spoke excellent English and had some perceptive things to say about American Jewish community life. He worked for the Lubovitcher movement, distributing literature both to libraries and individuals, and I found him capable of presenting a clear outline of the main tenets of Lubovitcher Hasidism.

The essential principle of Hasidism in general, he explained, was a belief that Divine Providence was concerned not only with man, but with everything in nature. Lubovitcher Hasidism differed from other Hasidic schools by virtue of its emphasis on the mind rather than on the heart alone: understanding was a *mitzvah* no less than faith, and to rest content with faith where understanding was required constituted a sin. The mind could and should rule the heart. The founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem, had shown the world that there was a "hidden" mystery lying behind the "revealed" surface of life and creation. Shneur Zalman, the founder of the Lubovitcher movement, had

come to "reveal" something of the "hidden," to transmute the mystery into rational formulations which could be grasped by the mind. For this reason, Lubovitcher Hasidism was also called *Habad* Hasidism—*Habad* being an abbreviation of the Hebrew words for wisdom (*Hochmah*), understanding (*Binah*), and knowledge (*Da-at*). Of course, along with this "effort of the mind," an "effort of the heart"—prayer—was needed.

This reminded my Russian-born friend that he had personally seen a prayerbook used by the Baal Shem. He had no doubt that it was the great teacher's book because there were blood-stains on the pages, and it was well known that the Baal Shem had wept tears of blood when he read of the sufferings of his people. Again I had the feeling which often came to me while speaking to the students at the Yeshiva: a sense of walking along together and coming suddenly to a door of the mind through which only a Hasid could pass, while others were left outside, bewildered.

Once I confessed this sense of frustration to a gray-bearded elder who was walking around the study hall while the boys were busy at their lessons. He was known as a *Mashpiah*—an "influencer." A *Mashpiah* is a specialist in the ideology of *Habad* Hasidism and his main task is to convey the *lechut*—the "inner marrow" or mood—of mystic doctrines to the students. *Mashpiim* also handle the overflow of Hasidim who come to the Rebbe with problems or confessions that he cannot find the time to deal with.

The *Mashpiah* to whom I spoke brought his red-rimmed eyes close to my face and asked whether I put on phylacteries every morning. "Once," he said, "I had shoes that were too tight, and I got a pain in my head." He tugged at my sleeve to emphasize his point. "The shoes can affect the head, do you understand? If you want to understand Hasidism, you must observe the commandments. What you do will help you understand."

This was good *Habad* doctrine, for Lubovitch strongly believes that one's physical life has a direct effect on the mind. Our food and speech and deeds have the power to open or close the "vessels of the spirit." In the *Tanya*, Shneur Zalman frequently associates qualities of the soul with specific parts of the body ("The evil spirit is in the

left ventricle of the heart, and the love of God flames in the right ventricle").

THE notion that the capacity of the mind to understand the mysteries of religion is dependent on actual physical performance of the commandments explains the bargain which another man, whom I had heard described as a *typische* Lubovitcher Hasid, tried to make with me when I asked him to help me study the *Tanya*. He demanded payment, which was to consist of my agreement to observe one more of the 613 commandments.

I don't think we ever formalized our covenant, but for several months I enjoyed visiting this Hasid, who served as a rabbi in a community not far from New York. Like most Hasidim, he would have preferred to live closer to the Rebbe, but the Rebbe had insisted that he go out into the world and "create an environment." The process of creation was difficult—the members of his congregation wanted him to shorten the prayers and include more English in the services, so that the young people would be attracted. He, on the other hand, felt that young people would remain in the synagogue only if *real* Orthodoxy were shown to them—a joyful Judaism with a living soul and not just the "dry bones." This difference of opinion made for problems. But, my *typische* Hasid would always remind himself with a smile, "One must have *bitachon*—faith." Besides, the Rebbe and the *chevra*—the "boys"—were only an hour's trip away, and when "I get into New York, all the problems immediately roll off my shoulders."

And there were other Hasidic devices for overcoming one's troubles. One could lift the soul by humming a Hasidic melody, or one could comfort oneself by pressing Hasidic doctrine into practical use. "All I have to do," the Hasid laughed, "is to look at the president of my synagogue sitting on the other side of the pulpit and say to myself, 'No—he's not really there—not really—only one Reality is really there, and of that Reality I needn't be afraid.'"

My friend was alluding to the central idea of Hasidism, that "There is no place empty of Him"; since God is everywhere, we need only penetrate the veil of appearances to behold the underlying Reality. In

Habad Hasidism this doctrine is intricately elaborated. God's "light" assumes "garments" so that it may be perceived by fleshly eyes. In this form it is called "the light that clothes itself," to distinguish it from "the light that surrounds," which is the infinite light pervading all creation that never assumes visible form. In the *Tanya* the manner of God's emanation, as well as the relation between the world of appearance and the underlying Reality, are discussed at length. But a serious philosophical problem remains—if God is in everything, He must also be in evil.

It is this pantheistic element in Hasidism that was vigorously attacked by its formidable "opponent," the great Gaon of Vilna. The Talmudic dictum, "There is no place empty of him," insisted the Gaon, meant only that His providence extends over all creation; it did *not* mean that God is co-extensive with creation. "It is sinful to say that we know anything about God's essence," the Gaon argued, "and particularly sinful to suggest that polluted and evil things can be synonymous with God."

During the pauses in our conversation, my Lubovitcher friend had a habit of humming, and the warm good humor of his voice helped soften the harshness of even his most rigid Orthodox opinions. With a smile he confessed his suspicion that Jewish children whose mothers did not observe the laws of ritual purity were physically as well as spiritually maimed. With the same smile, he defended his belief in the power of the Rebbe, offering to take a blessing "from anybody whose mouth has never said a lie and whose limbs have never committed a sin." The Rebbe was such a man and therefore able to bestow blessings.

Often childless families came to the Rebbe to ask his blessing—yet *he* was childless: did this not affect the faith of Hasidim? My friend looked pained and I apologized for my question. But no, I had misunderstood his reaction, my friend explained. It was not that Hasidim doubted the power of the Rebbe—but they were the "branches and he the root" and they simply shared in his pain.

My Lubovitcher friend was himself blessed with five children and a lovely wife. His little boys, with their luxurious earlocks and *yarmelkes*, played very comfortably with the Irish, Polish, and Negro children in the neighborhood. But it was the influence of

the non-religious Jewish community that the father feared. "Sometimes when I come to the words in the Sabbath evening prayer, 'Let me not bear in vain,' I shudder," he once confessed.

TO MAKE sure that Jews do not "bear in vain," the major effort of the Lubovitcher Hasidim is the construction and expansion of their school system. The Rebbe directs this activity, as he does every activity of the movement, but it is Rabbi Gourary, the Rebbe's brother-in-law, who is immediately concerned with the educational program and particularly with its financial aspects. His office is located in the Lubovitcher Yeshiva on Bedford Avenue in Brooklyn, and I arrived there one day during the noon-hour recess to find the streets around the large brick building filled with little Hasidim playing ball and chasing one another up and down. Some were dueling with ash-can covers as shields and sticks of wood as swords. All of them of course wore hats or head-coverings of some kind and the older boys had long earlocks, but apart from this they were indistinguishable from any group of children who had been released for lunch-hour games. I stopped one of the ash-can warriors long enough to learn that Rabbi Gourary could be found on the third floor of the building.

The Rebbe's brother-in-law, a small Panatella cigar in his mouth, was seated behind a desk opening some letters when I entered his office. On the desk there was a tray containing the remnants of a sandwich and a half-finished glass of tea. Rabbi Gourary was about fifty, a pleasant-looking man with perceptive blue eyes; his hair and beard, though gray, had obviously once been blond. He extended a limp hand in greeting and continued to open his letters, occasionally finding a check which he would place on a separate pile.

I asked him about his role in the Lubovitcher movement. "I am in charge of all the Yeshivas in Lubovitch all over the world," he replied. "Some ten thousand pupils study in Lubovitcher Yeshivas in America, Europe, Israel, and North Africa." His responsibilities involved not only the financial administration of the schools—a big job in itself—but also the curriculum and other academic details.

On the wall I noticed a picture of Rabbi Joseph Isaac, the present Rabbi's predecessor and father-in-law who was also Rabbi Gourary's father-in-law. I asked Gourary by what method a new Rebbe was chosen in the Lubovitcher movement when the deceased Rebbe had no sons—as was the case with Rabbi Joseph Isaac. He and Menachem Mendel, being Joseph Isaac's two sons-in-law, had been the obvious candidates for the office, and I had often wondered on what basis Menachem Mendel had been chosen. Gourary looked at me sharply for a moment. "If the Rebbe leaves a will," he answered briefly, "his instructions are followed. Otherwise, the 'Elders' of the movement decide."

What about the stories that people told about the powers of the Rebbe? He waved his cigar impatiently. "I'm not responsible for all the stories people tell." As for the Rebbe's advising on medical problems, "The Rebbe can send them to a good doctor. Of course," he added quickly, "Hasidim believe in the Rebbe's blessing. A Hasid believes in higher destiny—what you call luck. But what is luck, after all, but higher destiny? Hasidim believe in the power of the Rebbe to influence that destiny."

I asked Rabbi Gourary what made Lubovitch so much more successful than other Hasidic groups. His reply was quick: Lubovitch had taken the inner spirit of Hasidism and expressed it in forms you could "get your hands on."

Asking me whether I'd like to see the school, Rabbi Gourary pressed a buzzer. A moment later, a young man with the inevitable beard appeared and was instructed to take me on a tour of the school. "*Gei gesunterheit*—Go in health," Rabbi Gourary said, offering his hand as I arose.

MY GUIDE led me down a flight of stairs and we visited several classrooms where the boys sat in pairs behind rickety desks. Here and there a pair swayed back and forth in unison as the two children chanted their lessons in Hebrew and Yiddish. My guide explained that the younger pupils studied Jewish subjects from nine in the morning until one-thirty in the afternoon, after which they followed the public school curriculum required of all parochial and private schools by the New York Board of

Education. The upper grades went on with religious studies until two-thirty in the afternoon, and only then did their secular lessons, while the oldest boys—old enough to be free of control by the Board of Education—studied Talmud and Hasidic teachings until as late as seven o'clock in the evening.

In one of the classes we visited, a tall young teacher, wearing a felt hat that rested far back on his head, asked if we would like to hear the children recite. Several dozen hands shot up waving wildly in the air. His eyes gleaming proudly behind his spectacles, the teacher glanced around the room for a minute, and then called out, "Moishele." A chubby boy of about eight whose heavy winter cap had come undone, leaving an ear-flap hanging down, immediately drew back his hand, embarrassed at having been chosen. He walked hesitatingly to the front of the room and stood tongue-tied while the children, sensing that he would not deliver, began to wave their hands again. The teacher ignored this renewed supplication, and encouraged Moishele by quoting the first few words of the portion they had been studying in the Bible. Moishele took courage and recited the rest of the passage.

It was the section that dealt with Jacob's meeting with Esau upon returning from his sojourn with his father-in-law: "And with Laban did I live." Moishele chanted Jacob's words in Hebrew, translated them into Yiddish, and then added in a singsong voice the 11th-century commentary of Rashi, "And the 613 commandments did I keep." The teacher pointed out the letters of the Hebrew word *garti* ("did I live") could be rearranged to spell *taryag*, which means 613. This was why Rashi had suggested that when Jacob said, "And with Laban did I live," he was also indicating that though he had resided outside his own "environment," he had maintained the 613 commandments of the Law. Whatever scholarly critics may say about this manner of interpreting the Bible, its pedagogic effect is clear. To Moishele and the boys at the Lubovitcher Yeshiva, Jacob was no stranger. He covered his head, wore earlocks, and like any Lubovitcher Hasid, was concerned with the never ending challenge of a foreign "environment."

Later that afternoon I returned to 770 Eastern Parkway just in time to see the

older boys coming back from their assignments as teachers in "release-time hour"—that period which is set aside once a week in New York State public schools for religious instruction according to denomination. Many Jewish organizations object to the "release-time hour" system. But Lubovitch would not dream of neglecting the opportunity to send its boys out to stimulate the school-children's *pintele Yid*—that "point" of authentic religious faith, that element of pure Jewishness, that *Habad* Hasidim believe exists, however deeply buried, in every Jew. Now, home from their pedagogic labors, the young students were beginning to study *Hasidut*—the term they use to describe the mystic "inner" studies. They gathered in pairs or small groups around their texts, but the transition from the "outer" to the inner world took a while. "Come on, Herb," I heard one boy calling out good-humoredly to a companion whose mind was clearly wandering, "you'll lose your portion in the world-to-come."

Dusk was approaching, and some older men began to drift into the study hall to wait for the day's-end prayers. One of them stood by the pulpit and bound his waist with a *gartel*—that cord which a Hasid wears to remind him of the distinction between the "higher" and "lower" parts of man. A few minutes later everyone present moved to one side of the hall; almost immediately the Rebbe with quick steps entered through a door at the empty side of the room and walked to a large chair facing the congregation. He took his seat without looking around, at which point the man with the *gartel* began reciting the prayers.

Lubovitch has always emphasized the importance of clinging as accurately as possible to the musical tradition which has come down with each prayer, and the leader of the service chanted the familiar melodies in a sweet, low voice. When the *Sh'monah Esrei*, Eighteen Benedictions, was reached, the whole congregation rose, and the murmur of prayer gave way to complete silence, in accordance with traditional usage. As they read the prayer to themselves, the Hasidim inclined their knees slightly each time the words "Blessed be Thou" occurred, so that the silence was broken continually by the creaking of the floor. Here and there, also, someone sighed softly as he pressed his fists

against his chest and prayed for forgiveness. Everyone remained standing until the Rebbe had finished. When he took his chair, they too sat down and, like him, put their hands to their heads in private supplication. The stillness in the room deepened as "higher" and "lower" were bound together.

THAT night I arranged with Rabbi Hoda-kov for my second appointment with the Rebbe. It was more than a year now that I had been trying to "understand" Lubovitch—the faith and loyalty of its Hasidim, the success and continued vitality of its organization, its resistance to the degeneration common to hereditary spiritual dynasties. The obvious explanations did not really satisfy. After all, other religious groups had offered the same escape from personal responsibility, the same feeling of historic mission, the same sense of community.

The Lubovitcher Hasidim themselves had a ready explanation: "We have had great Rebbes." But I was beginning to believe that part of the "secret" might be precisely that Lubovitch depended less on its Rebbes than did other sects. That warm mystic mood of Hasidism, that sense of God's spirit pulsating through all creation—the inner marrow or *lechut*, as they called it—was not entrusted for communication to the personal powers of a single man. Other Hasidic leaders in Shneur Zalman's day had been as great; there was the saintly Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev (d. 1804), for example, and the gifted Nachman of Bratzlav (d. 1810), but their sects had remained vital for only as long as the founders were vividly remembered. Shneur Zalman, however, had constructed a system whereby the delicate and ephemeral grasp of the "unworldly" could be captured in "vessels" of rational formulation—vessels which could on demand be made to pour forth their supply of "living waters." The meticulous concern for organized study, for well-edited textbooks, for public relations and good business procedure—all so apparently incongruous in a sect of mystics—was actually a key to Lubovitch's special history. These "vessels" of thought and organization had made of Hasidism something "you could get your hands on."

Yet to the Lubovitcher Hasid, the secret still lies in the "greatness" of his Rebbe,

and it is true that without this faith of the Hasid in his Rebbe there would be no Lubovitcher movement. But can one understand how such faith operates without at least momentarily sharing in it? I thought not, and brought to my last meeting with the Rebbe an eagerness to identify, if only for a moment, with the Hasid's faith. I also brought a nasal cold and a slight fever which I now suspect had something to do with my experiences that evening.

My appointment was for 10 P.M. I came on time, though knowing by now that with respect to appointments, Lubovitch followed the dictum of another Rebbe, "the Kotsker," who maintained, "Where there is a soul, there cannot be a clock." On arrival, I found a group of Hasidim in the study hall, listening to one of their comrades who reputedly had a gift for remembering every word of the Rebbe's discourses. Several weeks ago the Rebbe had spoken "Torah," and since then the Hasidim had been gathering to hear this man with the photographic memory "repeat the Torah."

Noticing that the phones in the office were quiet, I approached Rabbi Hodakov's desk, and requested a few minutes of his time. The Rebbe's secretary shrugged his thin shoulders and invited me to take a seat. "Rabbi Hodakov," I asked, "could you tell me briefly what Lubovitch offers people?"

Rabbi Hodakov sat straight in his chair and his eyes brightened. Then he spoke so forcefully that a student standing over in a corner of the office looked up in surprise. "I can tell you in one word—*leben*, life." He paused for a moment. "There are other kinds of death besides the one of the grave. What is life for one creature on earth need not be life for another. A monkey may act like a man, and I don't know how he feels then—but if a man acts like a monkey, he stops being a man—he stops living.

"What is it that makes life?" Rabbi Hodakov's voice grew even stronger as he continued to speak. "It is the fulfilment of a mission and a purpose. In nature we have different classes—mineral, vegetable, animal, and then man. Within the class of man there is a species called the Jew. The Jew has his purpose like every other species, but what is this purpose?" A few more students had entered the office and were now listening openly to our discussion. Rabbi Hodakov

went on passionately. "We would not have known the purpose if God had not done us a *chesed*—a gracious favor. He gave us a Torah."

THE room had become quiet. The boys edged close, and I think Rabbi Hodakov was aware that he had an audience. I too felt self-conscious. All were waiting for my next question. Through the slight haze of my fever, an appalling thought suddenly penetrated to my mind. This was not just a conversation. It was going to become a *vikuach*—a religious disputation similar to those held in the Middle Ages between the "believer" and the "heretic." I, of course, was cast in the role of the heretic, and the boys in the room who had gathered to listen were convinced that, like all heretics, I was about to be annihilated by the logic and spiritual power of the truth. But dabbing my watery eyes and running nose with a handkerchief, and feeling somewhat like a lamb stretching out its neck to the knife, I offered the question that I knew was expected of me. "But how do we know that God gave us the Torah?"

Rabbi Hodakov's eyes glinted; the knife was lifted. "When was the Constitution written?" I mumbled a date, hoping that it was correct. But Rabbi Hodakov was not interested in my knowledge of American history. "How do you know?" he demanded. Witnesses and correlating documents, I ventured, adding a protest to the effect that the Constitution did not purport to be more than a human document. I remember using the word "witnesses" deliberately because I felt that he would want to seize on it in answering me. "Ah-hah"—Rabbi Hodakov sat up in his chair to deliver the *coup de grace*. "If witnesses are to be believed about a human document, then how much more difficult would it be to find real witnesses for a Divine document? Wouldn't it be even more difficult to forge such testimony?"

Actually, I wasn't sure that I followed his logic, but I blamed that on myself, or on the fever which was blurring my mind. Besides, I had come across the same line of argument before—it was made use of in the 12th century by Judah Halevi in his *Sefer Ha-Kuzari*. Six hundred thousand witnesses, says Judah Halevi, saw the Torah given by God to Moses. The event has been re-

lated by father to son in an unbroken chain of testimony. How could the claim that a whole generation had witnessed the giving of the Torah possibly have been invented in some later age? The elders would deny having heard of the event from their fathers and the claim would fall to the ground. Consequently, concludes Judah Halevi, revelation must be as credible a fact as any recorded event in history.

This argument had never impressed me before, but it now occurred to my feverish mind that it was very sensible, and I wondered why I hadn't understood it on other occasions. I was reaching for my handkerchief again when the buzzer rang. The Rebbe was waiting. I grabbed my notebook and escaped into the hallway.

THE quiet of the Rebbe's office and his soft-spoken greeting were like balm after the "disputation." "Shalom aleichem, Rabbi Weiner," Rabbi Menachem Mendel smiled, extending his hand. I protested that after a year of visiting 770 Eastern Parkway I knew that a good Hasid should not take the Rebbe's hand. "We don't have to begin that way," he said, beckoning me toward a chair. He looked a bit paler than when I had first seen him a year ago and there was more gray in his black beard, but the same grave smile played in his deep blue eyes.

I opened my notebook and sat back in the chair, again conscious of how comfortable and relaxing it was in the Rebbe's office. Then I remembered that this was my last chance, and resolved to ask even the most embarrassing questions in an effort to solve the enigma of Lubovitch. I explained to the Rebbe that more than a year had passed since I began trying to understand the movement, and that I had come to him now with a confession: I did not understand. Would he mind if I started this interview by asking him about the character of a Hasid? Rabbi Menachem Mendel smiled and told me to go ahead; as before I could speak English but he would answer in Yiddish. "Isn't the fact that Hasidim turn to the Rebbe for almost every decision in their lives—isn't this a sign of weakness, a repudiation of the very thing that makes a man human, his *b'chirah*—freedom of will?"

The Rebbe's answer came without hesitation, as if he had dealt with the question

before. "A weak person is usually overcome by the environment in which he finds himself. But our Hasidim can be sent into any environment, no matter how strange or hostile, and they maintain themselves within it. So how can we say that it is weakness which characterizes a Hasid?"

I pressed my question from another angle, and told him that I sensed a desire in *Habad* to oversimplify, to strip ideas of their complexity merely for the sake of a superficial clarity. As a matter of fact, I blurted out, all his Hasidim seemed to have one thing in common: a sort of open and naive look in their eyes that a sympathetic observer might call *t'mimut* (purity) but that might less kindly be interpreted as emptiness or simple-mindedness, the absence of inner struggle.

I found myself taken aback by my own boldness, but the Rebbe showed no resentment. He leaned forward. "What you see missing from their eyes is a *kera!*" "A what?" I asked. "Yes, a *kera*," he repeated quietly, "a split." The Rebbe hesitated for a moment. "I hope you will not take offense, but something tells me you don't sleep well at night, and this is not good for 'length of days.' Perhaps if you had been raised wholly in one world or in another, it might be different. But this split is what comes from trying to live in two worlds."

The Rebbe's *ad hominem* answer encouraged me to be personal in return. "But you too have studied in two worlds, and your Hasidim are rather proud of the fact that you once attended the Sorbonne. Why then do you discourage them from studying in the 'other world'?"

"Precisely because I have studied and I know what the value of that study is," the Rebbe replied quickly. "I recognize its usefulness. If there are people who think they can help God sustain the world, I have no objection. We need engineers and chemists, but engineering and chemistry are not the most important things. Besides, to study does not mean only to learn facts. It means exposure to certain circles and activities which conflict with a believer's values and faith. It's like taking a person from a warm environment and throwing him into a cold water shock-treatment several times a day. How long can he stand it? In addition, studies in college take place at an age when a man's character is not yet crystallized, usu-

ally before the age of thirty. Exposure then is dangerous."

THERE was a slight pause, and then I asked the Rebbe if he would object to being questioned about himself. He shrugged smilingly. Well, then, I said: the boys at 770 Eastern Parkway claimed that the Rebbe was able to see things they could not see and that he was not mere "flesh and blood." He himself, in our last interview, had given me a rather more rational explanation of the powers of the Rebbe, saying that they were a matter of "empathy." But I wanted to know whether he regarded himself and his six predecessors as mere flesh and blood.

For the first time he hesitated over his answer. "Are you asking me to tell you about myself?" he smiled. "I don't think you should write an article about me and my beliefs. But I can tell you what the position of the Rebbe is in Hasidism. We are, of course, all of us only flesh and blood, and I'm not responsible for all the stories you may hear. But you must approach the facts of the case without preconceived theories. Science, after all, means the willingness to observe facts and follow them to whatever conclusions they will lead—not to try to push the facts into a desired pattern."

"Do you believe, then, that the Rebbe has special insight and can see things and know things beyond the comprehension of ordinary people?" I still wanted a clear answer.

"Yes," said the Rebbe.

"And is this power given only to the Rebbe, or to other men also?"

"As a believer," replied the Rebbe, "I am convinced that it can only be given to a 'keeper of Torah and mitzvot.'" At that moment, a question I had not planned to ask came to my lips. "What is a *b'rachah*?"

"What?" asked the Rebbe, slightly startled.

"What does it mean when somebody comes to ask you for a blessing?"

"Are you asking me what I mean by a *b'rachah*?" the Rebbe deflected the question. "Better that I tell you what Hasidism means by it. A man is affected by many 'levels,' higher and lower. It is possible for the Tsaddik, the Rebbe, to awaken powers slumbering within a man. It is also possible to bring him into contact with a higher level of powers outside his own soul. A person

lives on one floor of a building and needs help from the floor above; if he can't walk up himself, someone else must help him get that help."

"Does that mean that the Rebbe can help a man up to a higher spiritual plane?"

"That's the hardest way," answered the Rebbe. "The easier way is to bring these powers down upon him."

I asked about miracles, and this time the Rebbe replied immediately. "To believe in the Creator, and to believe that there is a continuous relationship between the Creator and the creation, is necessarily to believe that the Creator can do anything with His creation."

We spoke about religious faith and I suggested that many people would like to believe but found it hard. Rabbi Menachem Mendel disagreed. "It's not so hard for people to believe. There are millions who believed in Gandhi and millions who believe in the Pope, and even atheists when pressed to a corner come up with belief."

When I protested that in most cases doubt seemed to overwhelm faith, the Rebbe nodded. "There can be doubts. To question God, however, is the first indication that one believes in something. You have to know something about God even to question Him. But we must try to overcome doubts by a constant feeding of the spirit. Just as a body that has been kept healthy can overcome a crisis, so a soul can defeat its crises and its doubts if it is constantly kept healthy."

"In that case, why are there so many without faith?"

The Rebbe looked at me directly. "They are afraid of their faith. They are afraid of following out the consequences of the faith which they would arrive at by honest observation of the facts. They are afraid that they might have to abandon some of their comfort or give up cherished ideas. They are afraid of changing their lives."

I brought up another problem. Several weeks before I had heard him say that America, rather than Israel, was the place where Jewish life could flourish best.* How did he reconcile this attitude with the commandment to leave the *Galut*, the Diaspora?

"What is *Galut*? *Galut* means the estrangement of a person from his essen-

*But there are some flourishing institutions and numerous followers of Habad in Israel.

tial self. If a person moves from an environment where he observed the commandments and had a Jewish soul, and comes to America where he forsakes the Torah while growing rich, free, and comfortable, he has nevertheless gone into exile, because he has left himself. It's not just assimilation, it's worse, it's what we call in English an *inferiority complex*. It is the admission that one's own values are inferior to the values of those around one. In Israel, too, it may be possible to go into *Galut*, to forsake the Torah and lose the spirit which is our essential nature, to be 'like unto all the nations.' In addition," the Rebbe said quietly, "America not only has the largest Jewish population in the world, but great material resources. Even as the spiritual can affect the material, so with material resources one can do things for the spirit."

The buzzer at the Rebbe's desk sounded. Rabbi Hodakov was reminding us that others were waiting. I decided to ask a final question. "Many Jews today are searching," I said to the Rebbe, "they want to return. What would you say to them to help them find their way?"

The Rebbe paused for a moment. "I would say that the most important thing is 'no compromise.' I would send to them the words spoken by the prophet Elijah: *How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.* Compromise is dangerous, because it sickens both the body and the soul. A compromiser who tries to mediate between religion and the 'environment' is unable to go in either direction, and unable to distinguish the truth."

But would not people reject such rigid alternatives?

"This is the contribution of *Habad* Hasidism," the Rebbe pointed out. "It's important to know that one must do everything, but at the same time we welcome the doing of even a part. If all we can accomplish is to save only one limb, we save that. Then we worry about saving another."

The buzzer rang again, and I arose, but the Rebbe motioned for me to wait. To my surprise he informed me that he had carefully read some articles about religion in Israel which I had published in *COMMENTARY* [July and August, 1955]. Another hour passed as Menachem Mendel Schneer-

son gently but firmly offered his criticism of the pieces. It was after three o'clock in the morning when I left the Rebbe's office and guiltily passed a bearded young man who was still waiting for his appointment. The secretary's office was closed, but from the street through a window I could see that Rabbi Hodakov was bent over his desk, his head buried in his arms.

THE NEXT morning when I returned to retrieve a brief-case I had left in the office, Rabbi Hodakov was still at his desk. His eyes were red and the phylacteries were on his head and arm. While he recited the morning prayers, one of the boys attended to his busy telephone. Two of the older students came up to me as I was leaving the office. They had heard that I had spent almost three hours with the Rebbe early that morning, and they wanted to know what I thought now about their Rebbe. Their eyes shone with pride as they awaited my reply. I remembered that the Rebbe had said that the open look in a Hasid's eyes was not naivety but the absence of a *kera*—a split.

Indeed, I thought, there is no "split" at Lubovitch. It offered its followers a world in which the mind was never confused by contradictions; where life was not compartmentalized; where the tensions between heart and mind, flesh and soul, God and His creation were all dissolved in the unity of a higher plan. Within this plan the leather strip of the phylacteries, and the gas chambers of Hitler, both serve their function, for "There is no place empty of Him." And any doubt or confusion that arose might be clarified by making oneself "as nothing" before the Rebbe, who in turn made himself "as nothing" before the will of God.

No, there was no *kera* in the eyes of the Hasidim who awaited my answer. They nodded their heads enthusiastically as I expressed my admiration for their Rebbe. I confessed to them that before leaving early that morning, I had asked the Rebbe for his personal blessing. What was more, my cold of last night was much better. They shook my hand as if I were paying them a personal compliment. For, after all, in this respect too there is no "split" in Lubovitch, where the Hasidim "are only the branches and the Rebbe is the root."